

# The Mysterious Ways of Wang Foo By Sidney C. Partridge

## The Lacquer Cabinet

"I DON'T care what it costs, I want it and I propose to have it. Why, it would be the greatest curio in all my collection. Just think of it—a real Chinese ghost shut up in his own little cabinet and ready to come and go whenever I open the door, like a squirrel in his cage. Isn't it great? It will make those Indian Buddhas and those Burmese idols look like nothing at all, and, just think, Tony, what a spiritualistic seance we can give when we get back to Syracuse, eh?"

"Well, old man, I suppose if you set your heart on it, you'll eventually get it, somehow. I don't believe I ever knew you really to want a thing—that is, a thing that money could buy—that you didn't sooner or later put your hand on it, but it looks as if you were going to have a mighty hard task before you this time. The captain says—and the old skipper has been out here a great many years, you know—that no European has ever gotten his hand on a real genuine one yet, and there have been lots of travelers hunting curios out here before us."

The above remarks were part of a conversation between Reginald Wells, a wealthy young American tourist, from central New York, and his college chum at Cornell, Theodore Trowbridge (known on the campus as "Tony"), as they sat in the smoking-room of the steamer Nam-Ching, out of Hongkong. They were real globe-trotters of the traditional American type. They had started out on a trip around the world, and, incidentally, on a good time, and at this present moment they were having their share of both. They had "done" India, the Straits, Java and Borneo, and now they were on their way north from Hongkong to Amoy to fill full their hunters' cup of joy with a genuine old-fashioned tiger hunt. They had heard incidentally of this sport in the south, but Col. Johnson, the American consul at Hongkong, had whetted their appetite for it to the keenest edge by showing them in his office the skin of a magnificent man-eater. "More than twelve feet long, gentlemen, from tip to tail! Had killed three the week before I shot him—grandest sport in the world, I can tell you."

That was enough. Nothing would do but a tiger-shoot. The consul made every preparation for them and the crack steamer of the Southern Navigation Company was now bearing them rapidly toward the lair of the beast, armed not only with guns and ammunition, but with something equally important, namely: letters of introduction to the leading English firm of the port. Messrs. Waring & Co. had been notified by wire of their coming and they were instructed from their bankers not only to entertain the travelers handsomely, but to have boats and coolies ready for the hunt.

Just at the moment that we are introduced to these gentlemen in the smoking room of the steamer, however, the interest in the tiger had suddenly waned and the all-absorbing topic was the rarity and value of the curios which they had collected in the orient. After listening patiently to their descriptions of the "unique" and "only genuine" articles which they had induced reluctant natives to part with at fabulous prices, Capt. Jones chimed in at last with:

"Well, you may have Buddhas and idols and josses galore, but there's one thing you haven't got—and it's one thing money can't buy, either—one that's a genuine ancestral cabinet with the original ghost inside. I've seen lots of tourists offer for them—and mighty high prices, too—but nary a one did they ever get, for the Chinaman would rather die than sell his ancestor's ghost; and that's what they believe is really in the little tablet in the lacquer box."

"Reggy," said Tony from the opposite side of the room, "we've got more of these miserable curios now than we know what to do with. Why, you could stack the whole museum at Cornell almost full with what we've shipped home already and even if you do induce some disloyal Confusionist to sell his ancestor's ghost it would cost you a small fortune to buy it—so what's the use?"

Six bells rang out from the wheel-house just at this moment and the appearance of the salon-boy with, "Velly sorry, gentlemen, but catchee lebben clock must putchee out lights," ended the conversation for the evening.

The good ship Nam-Ching dropped anchor in Amoy harbor on schedule time in the morning and the steam launch flying Waring & Co.'s house flag, with the head of the firm himself on board, came out to meet the travelers and give them a cordial welcome to the port and to the hospitality of the "hong," as such business establishments are called in the China seas. They found everything in readiness for the up-river trip and the hunt. Mr. Waring having put his own commodious houseboat, the Marguerite, completely at their disposal, and having engaged extra servants and competent native guides. They could start in a day or two—just as soon as they had rested from the sea trip. The tigers were waiting for them, messengers from the interior having reported further depredations from the beasts in the valleys of Foo-King, to the north of them.

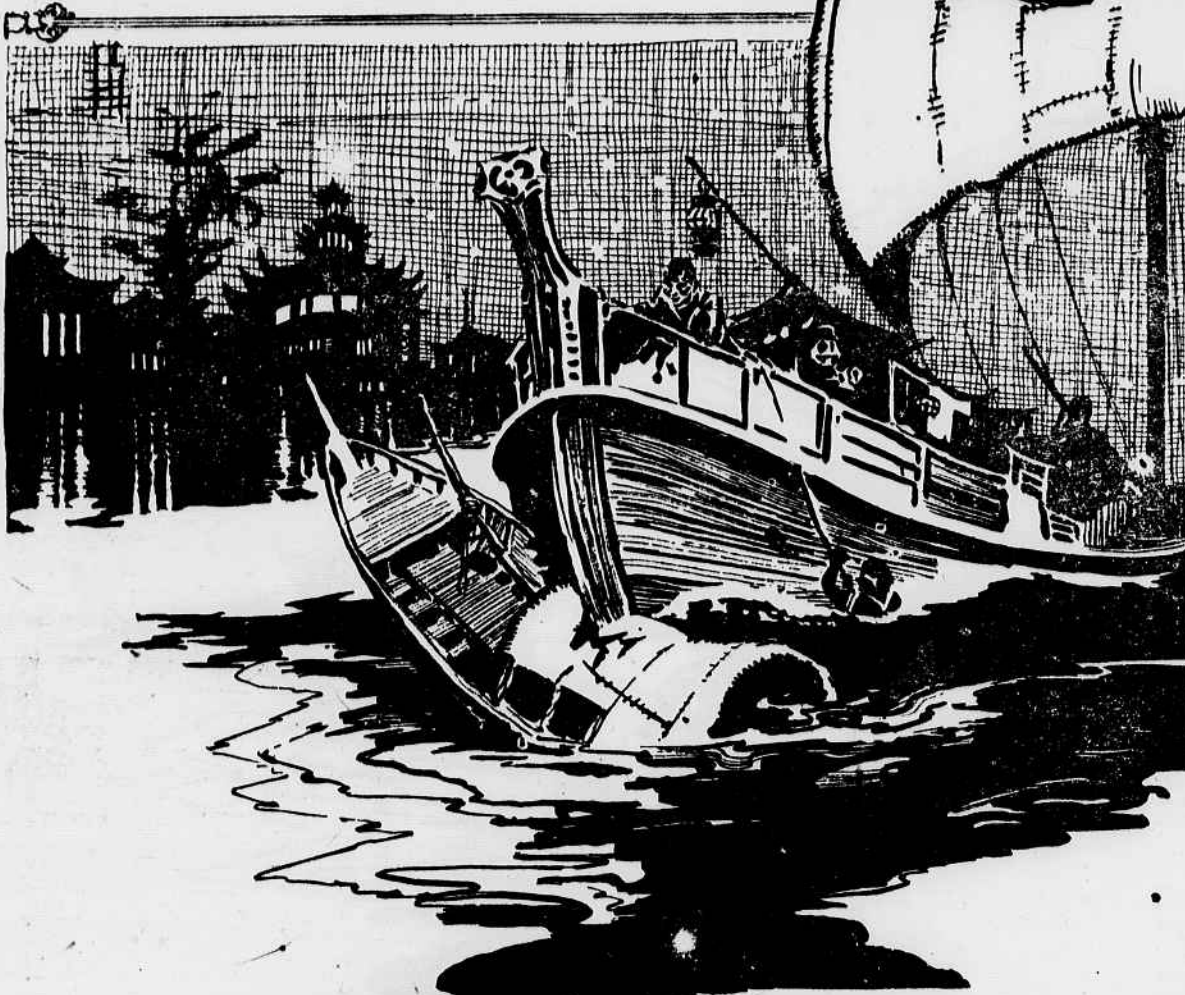
Amoy and its sights were soon exhausted and a picnic to the famous White Deer temple, followed by a dinner to the little foreign community at the hong, completed their program in that Chinese city, popularly known as the "dirtiest of the empire." They were to go aboard the Marguerite late in evening and start at daylight the following morning, when something occurred which made their visit one long to be remembered by their hosts as well as by themselves, and thereby hangs our tale.

Mr. Waring had invited three or

four fellow merchants, together with Sir Warren Chelmsford, the British consul (the American consul being at home on furlough), to join them at dinner and after the coffee the subject of conversation very naturally turned to tigers and the various experiences of Europeans who had gone in search of them. When this had been thoroughly thrashed out, Mr. Wells turned to the consul and said:

"Sir Warren, I am very anxious, indeed, to secure for my collection of curios a genuine gold-lacquer cabinet with the ancestral tablet of some Chinese family. You are an old and experienced resident of the east; how

member that old abbot who sold us his father's pet idol that had protected the family for fifty years, don't you? He was terribly shocked when we offered to buy it for twenty pounds and almost drove us out of the temple, but the morning we left Benares he came around early to the back door of the hotel and sold it to us for fifteen. Don't you think, Sir Warren, that if it was generally known here that two or three hundred Mexicans would be paid—on the quiet, of course—for a cabinet and tablet and ghost complete some noble scion of a Chinese family would be willing to risk it?"



APPEARING AS IF BY MAGIC OUT OF THE DARKNESS, A GREAT RICE JUNK CRASHED DIRECTLY INTO THEM. SPOTTY WAS SWEEP AWAY IN THE FLOOD AND WAS SEEN NO MORE.

no doubt about it, it certainly was the genuine article. Spotty explained it all in the most fluent "pidgin-English." He showed the opening in the top of the tablet through which the spirit of the departed entered and the seals that guaranteed his presence, and then, solemnly drawing forth from his sleeve an ancient dagger, turned to his astonished visitor and said:

"Suppose my no talkee tlee, you can killee me now."

"All right, Spotty, I'll take your word for it. Put away that dagger; I don't want to murder anybody for all the old curios in China. Here's your 500 Mexican. Wrap it up carefully and put it away in my grip and stow it under my berth on the boat."

Spotty counted the money over slowly and carefully and rolled it up in his capacious girdle. He packed the cabinet according to directions and then, as he reopened the windows and unlocked the door, he added, significantly pointing to his throat, "You no tellee any man till you get Melica side. Suppose mandalin savee my pay you cabinet, he choppee my head off so fashion."

The tide at Amoy is one of the worst on all the Asiatic coast, rising and falling over fourteen feet, and making navigation for small craft exceedingly dangerous. Spotty did not return on the steam launch that took the travelers to the houseboat, but called a sam-pan of his own and directed the boatman to take him to the lower city. The outgoing current swept the fragile little sam-pan along and in a very few minutes they were opposite the custom house wharf and they turned to pass in between the buoys, when, appearing as if by magic out of the darkness, a great Ning-po rice junk crashed directly into them and overturned the sam-pan in an instant. The boatman managed to seize a bamboo rope hanging over the side and clambered on board the junk, but Spotty was swept away in the flood and was seen no more.

There was an unusual excitement in the market street of the town the following morning and the news spread quickly from mouth to mouth that one of the servants in the foreign hong had been seen in the act of robbing his ancestral hall. An old egg peddler from the country had brought the news. He had been resting quietly by the roadside partly hidden by the bushes and had seen Spotty climb over the wall of the inclosure, enter the hall and deposit a few minutes later, with a bundle under his arm. On looking through the window, he saw to his horror that the ancestral cabinet was missing from the central shelf.

He recognized Spotty at once from having seen him at the kitchen door of the hong where he stopped to sell his eggs to the cook. Before night the news had reached the tao-tai's yamen and the runners were sent to arrest the house boy, but returned with the statement that he had disappeared and had left no trace behind him. Under the old law of China by which a parent is held responsible for the sins of a child, the runners returned in the morning and, seizing the compradore, dragged him away to the yamen, to be held there until his son should give himself up. Mr. Watsford was sitting at his office desk

when the second house boy rushed in to him with the news that Hoo-Sam-Tok, his compradore and right-hand man, was actually a prisoner in the hands of the native authorities. He could scarcely believe his senses, but when he realized it was true he seized his hat and, ordering his private launch to be ready immediately at the wharf, hastened at once to the British consulate.

"Well, Chelmsford," he said, in a great state of excitement, "here's a pretty how-do-you-do. The tao-tai has arrested my compradore because his son Scotty stole a miserable little tombstone out of the cemetery last night and they are probably bamboozling him up at the yamen now. My whole hong is upset by this stupid nonsense and I want you to go or send over there at once and order him released."

"I am sorry for you, Watsford," answered the consul, "but you see it's on Chinese soil and entirely outside my jurisdiction."

"Do you mean to tell me that the British government can't send over there and get that chap free? Why, it's outrageous!"

"The only thing that I can do for you is to go over there and ask the tao-tai personally to see that he is kindly treated until the son turns up."

"Well, for goodness' sake go quick, then. You know what those yamen runners are when they get a foreign employe into their hands—they'll have his very life blood if he doesn't pay up handsomely."

The consul and the merchant returned in the launch to the yamen and after an interview with his excellency received his assurance that no harm would be done to the prisoner, but that he was obliged to hold him in confinement until every effort had been made to secure the person of Scotty.

Two full weeks passed by, but not a trace of the criminal could be found. The tao-tai then sent a dispatch to the consul telling him that the town was in such a state of excitement that unless Scotty turned up within six days he would be obliged to apply the torture in order to secure a confession from the compradore and thus appease the people.

"Good gracious," said Watsford, "isn't there any human way of catching the villain and saving his poor innocent father from those infernal demons? Why, if they once get at him they'll kill him, sure as fate."

"I have been thinking over it a good deal," answered the consul, "and I have decided to wire to the governor at Hongkong for Wang Foo."

"And who is this Wang Foo?"

"The most remarkable man in the colony. They call him the 'mysterious.' He is a Chinese gentleman of means who gives his whole time and attention to ferreting out criminals, and seems to succeed when all others fail. His record as a detective among his own people is certainly wonderful."

"Wire for him at once. Tell them to send him on the very first ship and look to me to foot the bills."

The man of mystery arrived on the appointed date and after his usual very careful and painstaking inquiries, together with private examinations of all the parties interested, proceeded to his interview with his excellency, the tao-tai. He was most courteously received and, after the preliminary tea drinking, requested that all the attendants be retired and that the doors to the private apartment be securely closed and locked. The tao-tai reluctantly granted his request. They sat down facing each other upon the couch of honor and took up the tobacco pipes. Wang lit the paper fuse and, looking at his companion straight in the face, made with it certain passes in the air. The tao-tai appeared confused. Wang continued the motions and with the smoke outlined two ancient Chinese hieroglyphics. "Shoong-Hwai!" exclaimed the startled official as he rose. "The brotherhood!"

"The same," answered Wang, as he calmly replaced the fuse in the holder. "You have not forgotten me, then? You remember the case at Long Chow and how I saved you from official disgrace? The time has come, now, for you to return that favor."

"What favor do you ask?"

"The relief and justification of Hoo-Sam-Lok."

"But suppose I do not grant it? What then?"

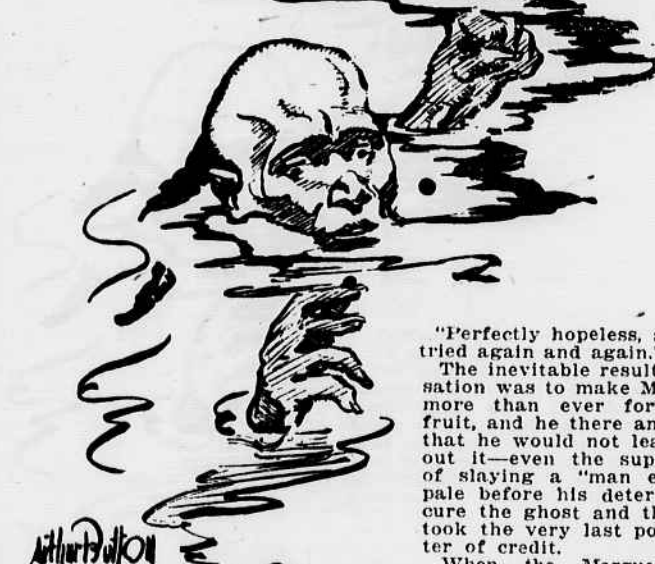
Wang leaned forward and, gripping the official's hand, held it like a vise. "If you do not, the official promotion to provincial judge which you have been expecting in a fortnight's time will mysteriously fall through! Do you understand?"

"But how can I satisfy the people's demands? They know that a crime of the most heinous nature has been committed and the heads of all the clans and guilds in town are clamoring at my gates for torture and for trial. If I refuse to gratify them I am a ruined man. How can I break the laws and traditions of the empire?"

"Listen!" said Wang, still gripping the tao-tai's hand. "Is it not written in the annals, 'The superior man adjudgeth the punishment to the crime'? You know he is innocent—absolutely innocent—you also know as well as I that there are ways of going through these forms without injury to the victim. 'Fak-shing, fak-ching'—'punish lightly,' you know how. See that it is done! I demand it in the name of the brotherhood! Farewell!"

The following morning Wang Foo, the detective, met Mr. Arthur Watsford by special appointment in his private office and, after pledging him to secrecy as absolutely essential to the release of the compradore, addressed him in these words:

"Mr. Watsford, what I am about to say to you will probably astonish you, but you have lived long enough in China to know that there are more astonishing things here than any European has ever dreamed of. I want you to leave this case absolutely in my hands, and I guarantee that the prisoner will return to you on the 30th of the month, without a trace of his unfortunate experiences, thoroughly well and sound and able to resume his duties. He will come back to you with the respect of the Chinese community, completely vindicated of any charge of complicity in the crime of his son, but in the meantime, he must pass through the ordeal which the tra-



"Perfectly hopeless, sir; it has been tried again and again."

The inevitable result of this conversation was to make Mr. Wells hunger more than ever for the forbidden fruit, and he there and then resolved that he would not leave China without it—even the supreme attraction of slaying a "man eater" began to pale before his determination to secure the ghost and the cabinet, if it took the very last pound on his letter of credit.

When the Marguerite lifted her anchor at daylight in the morning the coveted cabinet was aboard, securely locked in a sole leather suit case and hidden away under the lower berth of the cabin.

How did it ever get there? Let us see.

When Ah-Woo, the faithful house-boy of the Waring (and son of Sam-Tok, the compradore), came into Mr. Wells' room late in the evening to assist him in packing his baggage he looked carefully around, closed both the windows and then mysteriously proceeded to lock and bolt the door. Having taken these precautions, he produced from the inner recesses of a commodious gown a carefully wrapped package of yellow silk, and, placing it on the dressing table, remarked to the rather astonished traveler:

"You can save, my blongee Ah-Woo, my master callee 'Spotty' 'cause my catchee smallpox (pointing to the decorations left by that dreaded disease upon his face). My have hear you speakee last night wantchee buy cabinet with Chinaman's spilt inside. No can buy store side. Suppose culio-man sell, mandalin kill he. Have catchee one piece this side can secure my great-gland-father ghost inside he. Suppose you pay me \$500, my givee you, my no can sell."

Spotty here proceeded slowly to unwrap the covering of silk and from it he brought forth a beautiful little cabinet of the most exquisite gold lacquer and set it upon the table. It measured about ten inches in height and about five inches in width. It had two little doors in front, clasped together with bars of delicately carved bronze, and when these were opened they revealed within a golden tablet with the posthumous titles of a man of noble rank. There could be

would you advise me to go to work to get it?"

"Ah, Mr. Wells," replied the consul, "you are not by any means the first one that has asked me that question, and I can only say to you what I have said to all the others—that they are absolutely unobtainable. The Chinese are the most reverential and particular people in regard to the spirits of the departed, and any disrespect shown to them calls down upon the culprits the dire vengeance of the gods. In their 'superstition,' as we ignorantly call it, they firmly believe that one of the ghosts or spirits of the dead—and every individual possesses three—enters into the ancestral tablet of the lacquer tablet. It remains there while the doors are closed and passes in and out when the doors are opened. It must be most respectfully treated; offerings of rice and tea and wine must be regularly supplied to it and 'spirit-money,' as they call those strips of gold and silver paper that you see scattered around the cemeteries, must be provided for all its contingent expenses. When any of these are neglected misfortune of some kind will surely fall upon the family. To injure one of these tablets while it is 'vivified,' as they say, is an insult to one's ancestors, and to destroy it or to sell it to a European—which is the worst insult of all—is a crime which not only surpasses murder, but outrages the entire community where it occurs. So you see, now, why none are ever offered for sale."

"Not for any amount of money? Money is very powerful, you know, in overriding superstition. We found that over and over again in India, didn't we, Tony?" Addressing himself to his chum, he went on: "You re-